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Guns: A Tale of Two Cities and Nineteen People

Last week, in the little town of Harrisonville, Mo., a lone gunman raced across the sleepy town square, squeezing rounds out of his M-1 carbine as he went. This week, on Monday afternoon, a lone gunman stood in the parking lot of a shopping center in Raleigh, North Carolina, squeezing rounds out of his .22 caliber semi-automatic carbine, crouching calmly only to reload his weapon before rising and firing again.

The body count, more reliable than some others we have seen of late, excluding the gunmen themselves, was six dead and eleven wounded. Charlie Simpson killed three and wounded three in Harrisonville and Harvey McLeod killed three and wounded eight in Raleigh. When he was through, Charlie Simpson, 21, put the muzzle of his M-1 in his mouth and pulled the trigger. He was buried by his friends last week. When he heard the first sirens, according to witnesses, Harvey McLeod turned the gun to his own head and fired. Presumably he will be buried later on this week.

Harvey McLeod, 23, according to people who knew him, was a shy, clumsy fellow who was never clever with girls. He had recently taken a job as a janitor. The local police chief related that McLeod had a record dating back to 1964 including assault with a deadly weapon. Just Sunday, he was arrested on charges of falsely reporting the theft of an automobile. On Monday morning he bought the .22 and in the afternoon, he and three other people were dead.

Charlie Simpson was one of a group of nine long-haired young men who hung around the Harrisonville town square upsetting the local populace with their appearance, their unwavering gazes at the passersby and the preference of eight of them to draw unemployment checks rather than to work. A month before the shooting, Charlie confided to a friend, "I'm sick of the world, but it's nothing serious." He was crying as he talked. Later, the police arrested all of Charlie's friends for loitering. The next morning, he took his life's savings and bailed them all out. That afternoon, he and three other people were dead.

Neither Mr. Simpson nor Mr. McLeod will be around to tell us why he decided to end his life as he did or why he chose, at the end, to turn his weapon upon himself. It is clear, however, that in each of these young men, something snapped to turn life's potential toward death and destruction. It is also clear that in McLeod's case, a man with a record of arrests, one occuring in the immediate past, could purchase a rifle in a hardware store with the same ease that any other citizen could purchase a flashlight in the same store.

Two weeks ago, in the aftermath of the attempt on Governor Wallace's life, this newspaper reaffirmed its view that handguns should be outlawed except under carefully circumscribed conditions and that long guns should be registered and their owners licensed to use them. In a complex and thrusting society of over 200 million, there are bound to be a number of people who cannot cope with the problems of the world around them or with the conflicts that the world unleashes inside themselves. The country recognizes that in such an interwoven and difficult society, not everyone is quick enough of muscle or eye to be given the opportunity to drive or aim an automobile. By the same token, it is a reasonable proposition, it seems to us, that not everyone is sufficiently stable of mind or spirit to be given the opportunity to aim and fire a rifle.

We recognize that just as the licensing of drivers and the registration of automobiles have not ended the slaughter on our highways, the licensing of riflemen and the registration of their weapons will not end gunplay in our national life. But, as we have said repeatedly, and ever more wearily and sadly, it might make tragedies such as those of Harrisonville and Raleigh and Charlie and Harvey much less likely to occur.